

The Analysis of Sacrificial Rituals in Iran Based on Avesta and Pahlavi Texts

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Keywords: Gahan, Yashts, Sacrifice, Praise, Pahlavi texts.

Abstract. Sacrifice is a ritual with an antiquity as long as history in all the areas of human civilization and it is a guide for understanding the ancient ideology of all millennia. This study is an attempt to illustrate a general scheme of sacrifice and its generative thoughts throughout old cultural eras of Iran. This paper tries to identify sacrifice in Iran by considering every details mentioned in religious texts. Due to the fact that Iran has been a land of coexistence of different tribes and cultures in history, and that the Iranian religion is a combination of native Iranian tribes, Elamite, Indo-European, Magus and Mazdeism beliefs it seems impracticable to segregate rituals to specific nations and epochs. Nevertheless, single Gnosticism finds a very unique and distinct position in Iranian religion. This research aims not only to collect the viewpoints, examples and Iranian religion documents about sacrifice but to be a manifestation of the dynamics of Iranian thought.

1. Introduction

Worshiping was born out of human knowledge as to his failure in encountering phenomena that are out of his will and power, “having faith in the survival of soul and the grandeur of ancestors is to believe in a power beyond that of soul which is present in every phenomenon” [1]. Recognizing of a superior entity brought about the need to praise and adore that supreme power. This entity has been worshiped by many various names in different historical epochs and sacrifice rituals have been one of the main pillars of worshiping from the beginning. Not only is sacrifice the closest link between the material and the divine world but also it had once been the incarnation of the divinity’s power itself. “Every sacrificial ritual is a repetition of The Creation” [2]. Sacrifice was presumed in ancient worlds as a means for attracting the support and gratification of gods and was sometimes deemed a unique power even in the infinity of myths.

This study aims at analysing sacrifice and all its related rituals and ceremonies based on ancient Iranian text. Meanwhile, historical documents and also Greek historians’ works¹ have been used in order to clarify some points and resolve ambiguities.

1.1. Notion of Sacrifice. The word “ghorbani” (meaning sacrifice) comes from “ghorb” which means closeness which can be towards a god, a divine entity or even some natural element. In Avesta “yaz” has been used instead of “ghorbani” and its related verbs, and in Sanskrit, “yaj”, is the equivalent root. In late Avesta and Pahlavi’s texts the root “pak”² has also been used in a few cases which will be discussed further in this paper. In Parthian language the word “pažat- fražat/” has been suggested for sacrifice [3].

Sacrifice is a plant, an animal or a human selected for winning god’s or heavenly support against devilish power [4]. The death of the sacrifice is regarded as transfer of vitality to the immolator from the one being sacrificed. In many communities, human sacrifice has been replaced with plant or animal sacrifice through cultural or social changes. However, in communities where people believed in animal or plant totems, plant or animal sacrifice was used from the beginning.

2. Purpose of the study

Sacrifice is one of the most basic beliefs and ceremonies in the history of human societies and one of the most prominent aspects of mythology. It has also an inseparable bond with religion, collective world view, rules, beliefs and social traditions. Accordingly, its study can resolve many unknown mysteries in history and mythology. As one of key motifs in religious practices, sacrifice sheds light on every society's viewpoint towards the divine and material worlds in different eras. Indeed, the type and form of sacrifice has its roots in cosmology, religion and how each civilization defines divinity. Therefore, a deeper investigation of the issue would lead to a better and fuller understanding of each nation's historical identity.

3. Review of literature

Sacrifice has been such a common practice in all human societies and its trace can be found in the mythology of so many civilizations that it is likely that any investigation in religion, history and folklore will be relevant to this subject. One of the most specialized and professional studies about sacrifice in Old Iranian texts has been done by Kellens in French. He published his research result in this area as *Promenade dans les Yashts a la lumiere de travaux recents*, in the hundredth annals of college de France in 1999-2000. In his work, Kellens specially emphasizes the sacrifices mentioned in Yashts 5, 9, 15 and 17. Thanks to his profound knowledge and to other Avestan and Sanskrit writings, Kellens has been able to draw astounding facts from various familiar texts.

Mehrdad Bahar also discusses sacrifice in some chapters of his two books, *A survey of Iranian mythology* [2005] and *From myth to history* [2002], in a very delicate language. In these books, there are many detailed discussions on sacrifice and its philosophy and he holds this belief that blessing is the ultimate aim of every sacrificial ritual or ceremony.

No religion is without ritual..., but the main goal of rituals is concerned with blessing. Blessing is the major part of every ritual held by primitive or even modern people. If you take a look at the history of religion in West Asia, you will find that sacrifice in its oldest form has been systematically in the form of human sacrifice. Animal sacrifice is a more recent variation and the story of sacrificing a sheep instead of Ismail marks the transition from human to animal sacrifice. However, the main point about sacrifice is that the blood of the sacrifice was given to plants, animals and human himself or scattered on farms as they believed that it will bring growth and fertilization and they ate raw flesh or drank blood because they assumed this would give them that animal's power [4].

Bahar attempts to appreciate the origin of different rituals and customs with regard to the relation between social facts and religious and mythological backdrops. The valuable point which makes his work unique is his emphasis on cultural interaction.

In the author's view it seems natural if we trace back the mythology, rituals and other cultural aspects of every one of Indo-European, Arian and native tribes in history and clearly identify the elements and structures of every one of them in order to be able to explain and justify the change in the myths, customs and specific cultural configurations formed after the first millennium AD. In an attempt to appreciate the Indo-European and Arian culture we return to early cultural era of Indo-Europe and we define Arian's culture with greater information obtained from Indo-Iranian civilization era as reflected in Vedas, Rig Veda specifically [1].

Benveniste, in his famous work, *Persian religion according to chief Greek texts* [1998], describes the reports of prominent historians on Iranian religion, employing many of Herodotus, Strabo, Plutarch, Enzik of Kolb's ideas, to name a few, to which he adds some succinct but useful explanation as well. In this work, he identifies sacrifice as one of the elements that gave rise to the emergence of religion.

It can be inferred from what Herodotus says that his accounts are related to a very specific type of religion which corresponds, both in beliefs and ideas and in ceremonies and rituals, to the ancient Indo-Iranian remnants. These remnants despite entailing the worship of multiple gods and forces of nature, attach great importance to holding sacrificial rituals. It seems as if, some new practices, drawn from foreigners, have been added to old traditions. [5]

Another such work which has considered Iranian religion in the works of Western writers, albeit with a different approach, is a book by de Jong named *Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin literature, traditions of the Magi*. Zoroastrian religion has been fully studied in this book exploiting Pahlavi, Avestan and works of above-mentioned historians. Parts of this book are dedicated to sacrificial rituals as mentioned in Avesta.

4. Sacrifice in Iran

4.1. Sacrificial Rituals in Iran. Etymologically³, there is no literal distinction in Iranian ancient documents and texts between the two concepts of ‘prayer’ and ‘sacrifice’ since both come from the same root⁴. One may conclude that there was no difference between sacrifice and prayer in practice as well. What has been left from Greek historians’ writings also confirms this fact. In this section, attempt has been made to clarify the details of sacrificial rituals by comparing the sacrificial ceremonies mentioned in old religious texts with the documents of Western historians. It is evident that these ceremonies through the passage of time and by social, cultural and religious transitions have been subject to great change.

4.1.1. Sacrifice in Gahan. Although Gahanic texts give us no useful information about sacrificial rituals approved by Zarathustra, if existing at all, they are a very reliable source for studying pre-Zarathustrian religious rituals. In Gahan, Zarathustra stands up for useful beasts as Yasna 29 starts with the sacred cow’s complaint.

The soul of the cow complains to you: ‘for whom did you create me? Who fashioned me? Wrath, oppression, fury, spite and violence hold me. I have no shelter other than you. Thus, reveal yourselves to me with good pastoral work.’ [6]

Humbach ascribes this protest against the brutal slaughter of cattle in sacrificial rituals to pre-Zoroastrian times and he thinks that the cow’s soul (gush urvan) in here is the soul of that cow which has been offered by immolators [7]. It appears that this complaint is a prologue to what is stated in Yasna 32 about sacrifice and priests and clergies’ cruelty. Further in stanzas 6 and 7 Ahura Mazda answers the cow’s soul.

Ahura Mazda, he who knows the laws by (his) being, utters: indeed none has been found either by words, or by truth. Whereas he created you for ranchers and shepherds.

Ahura, he who is in accord with righteousness, created both, mixture (well known) for fat and milk for cow, he the wise one, (he) who (is) successful in teaching the poor. Who (is ready) for you in the way of good mind? Who will bring both (heavenly fat and milk)? [7]

Humbach makes some changes in his revision of Gatha:

Ahura Mazda, knowing the rituals by His vital force, says (to the cow): “No judgment from the truth itself has been found across the globe, for the shaper has fashioned you for the cattle-breeding herdsman.”

In harmony with truth, Ahura Mazda, by His teaching beneficial to the emaciated, fashioned for the cow both the mantra of nourishment and the milk. Who may be able through good thought to send these things down to the mortals? [7]

Zachner has a rather different translation of these two stanzas:

Then Ahura Mazda, the knower of rules, he said with wisdom: there is no lord, no judge in harmony with the sacred law. So, he created you for the shepherd and the farmer. Ahura Mazda has built this hymn (Mihr) from fat (about fat) for the cow (the useful beast) and the milk for those who desire food; that sacred based on the orders. [8]

In the above we can perceive Zarathustra's viewpoint on useful animals. The purpose of cow's creation is not for it to be slaughtered brutally; God, The Creator, has created it for breeding and multiplication. Zeahner believes that this is suggestive of flesh and blood being replaced with milk and fat in sacrificial rituals—a slow transition from bloody sacrifice [8]. This is what happened in Upanishads⁵ period in India in a different fashion where external sacrifice became internal (mortification) [9]. As stated earlier in this passage, Zarathustra in Yasna 32 reproaches the sacrifice of evil worshipers (Div Yasnan) as he continues to support useful cattle and this protest continues through Yasna 48.

4.1.2. Sacrifice in Yashts. Yashts are very rich sources for studying the history and mythology of the worshipping rituals in Iran. In addition to texts which are implicitly concerned with sacrifice, Yashts 5, 9, 15, 17 contain unique lists of mythical characters who ask their favours from gods by means of sacrifice. This list includes any type of characters from Ahura Mazda and Zarathustra to Azi Dahak and Afrasyab. The information which can be gleaned from these Yashts about sacrifice mostly includes the name of the immolators, their favours and the place where they hold the rituals. In the fifth and ninth Yashts we come across a very old form of sacrifice tradition. This tradition which may be explained by the composition of yaz + acc, is usually followed by such phrases as “a hundred stallion, thousands of cattle and ten thousand sheep”:

satəm aspanəm arúnəm hazayrəm gauuəm baēuuarə aṇumaiianəm

In spite of many controversies regarding the morphological issues⁶ of this phrase, only one meaning can be extracted from it and that is mass killing. It is obvious that this sacrifice does not belong to any particular group. Kellens comments,

What difference can be made between mass killing and an Avestan tradition? Darmesteter used to think that neither Yama nor Yusht were warriors. This difference is not about warrior's sacrifice and that of non-warriors, nor is it about pagan's sacrifice and that of believers. Vishtaspa and Zarir both sacrifice for Zarathustra. [10]

We cannot claim with confidence that the tradition stated in Yashts is just a reminder of mythical heroes' memories or an indicator of the usual way of holding those rituals. Some limited examples of sacrifice rituals in Iran, performed in the same way as those in Yashts, have been mentioned in historical documents. For instance, Herodotus quotes that Xerxes the Great sacrificed thousands of cattle for Trojan's of Athens or Vishofer quotes from Diodorus⁷ the ceremonies held by Peucetas, Satrap of Persia, in Persepolis at the time of Alexander.

He (Peucetas) arranged a ceremony for the army after he gathered from all over Persia a huge number of animals for sacrifice and whatever was needed for the ceremonies and rituals. He, with the help of participants, formed four concentric circles. The outer circle's perimeter was ten meters and comprised of the silver-shield Macedonians and Alexander's courts who fought by his side in the battle. The next circle was four meters where low-level commanders and their friends were seated; and finally in the inner circle whose perimeter was two meters, every Iranian and Persian's commander in chief lay on their throne and were respected greatly. And then in the middle of this last smallest circle were altars for the gods, Alexander and Philip. [11]

The noteworthy point here is the huge number of animals that have been sacrificed. It has been written that Peucetas' goal in celebrating such feast was to attract Iranian's trust and thus it is

natural that he tries to follow their well-known tradition. Dinwari⁸ cites in Alakhbar that Bahram Choobin sacrificed a thousand cattle in one ritual [8]. Xenophon also narrates New Year's sacrifice rituals in Achaemenian's court in which many cows and horses were sacrificed [12]. It appears that mythical heroes' memory of mass killing has remained in Iranians' minds.

A very distinctive way of offering is mentioned in Ram Yasht, which is the same for all the immolators even for Azhidahak. However, there is no more any mention of a hundred horses, a thousand cattle or ten thousands sheep. Worshipping rituals are done in an exclusive way: "upon a golden platform, on a golden pillow, on a golden carpet, by shaking the Barsom and hands to pray" [12]. Here, the favours in Nahid Yasht have been repeated. There exists another form of sacrifice which is discussed in Bahram Yasht (stanza 50) and Tishtar Yasht (stanza 58): "Then Ahura Mazda asked Arian settlers to offer articles, spread Barsom, roast a sheep, white, black, or another colour, but single-coloured" [13].

It appears that the sacrificial ritual here is totally different from that of Aban-Yasht and Darvasp-Yasht. Herodotus describes an Iranian ritual that bears some resemblance to the above excerpt:

They build no altar to for worshipping gods, light no fire; they offer no liquor, play no reed, present no chaplet, no food ransom. The worshippers of these bagas take the sacrifice to a clean place. While his head is decorated with a wreath of plants (usually flowers) he praises gods. The man who offers the sacrifice is not allowed to ask blessings only for his personal gain, but pleads gods to bestow goodness and ease to all Iranian people including himself and the King. After cutting up the sacrifice and cooking its meat, he spreads a soft plant, particularly clover and lays the meat of the sacrifice on it. Then, a magus stands by it and mutters over it the hymn of gods. This is how Iranians sing worshipping hymns. Without the attendance of a magus, the sacrifice is not allowed to proceed. After a pause, the worshipper takes the sacrifice meat with himself and uses it however he wants. [5]

Many studies believe that, by the hymn of Gods, the author is referring to Yashts. Benveniste regards this as a relic of the religious rites of pre-Zoroastrian Iranian natives. In contrast to the Yashts previously mentioned, there is no mention of personal wants in this Yasht, all Aryan people being its beneficiaries. Another point regards the presence of a magus at the sacrificial rituals. There is no account of the attendance of a magi in any of the four above-mentioned Yashts. However, in all the documents on sacrifice in Iran, whether verbal or written, having one magus who conducts the rite is regarded as necessary.

The discrepancy seen in the entity being sacrificed appears to be due to the motivation for conducting the ritual. All those who perform sacrificial rituals in Yashts 5, 9, 15 and 17 have some wish from gods. In fact, a sacrifice is an oblation dedicated to gods in the hope of the acceptance of a prayer; if the sacrifice is rejected, so will the prayer. We will examine these requests in the following.

4.1.3. Oblatory demands. Mention has been made in Yashts of 21 people who have conducted worshipping ceremonies with an expression of some demand. As we shall see, what counts as the deciding factor for the acceptance or rejection of an oblation is the identity of the worshippers, their affinity with Mazdaism, and the substance of their demand, not their adherence to the requirements of the ceremony. Among all these people, Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster's demands and the manner of worshipping stand out. (Yt.5.17)

Ahura Mazda praised Him with Haoma and milk, a Barsom, expert words and thought, decent speech, deed, and Zohar. He requested the blessing to make Pourušaspa Spitāma's son, Zoroaster, to think according to religion, speak according to religion, and act according to religion. [14]

In the fifth Yasht, Zoroaster makes a similar demand from gods:

The pure Zoroaster praised Him with Haoma and milk, a branch, expert words and thought, upright speech, deed, and Zohar. He requested the blessing to make the valorous

Keygoshtastb, Lohrasb's son, to think according to religion, speak according to religion, and act according to religion. [14]

Zoroaster makes the same demand in Art-Yasht and Darvasp-Yasht (the 17th and the 9th Yashts in Avesta) for the enlightened and virtuous Hutaosa (vañuhīm āzātām hutaosām).

In the same two Yashts, we find that even gods need to offer sacrifices for the acceptance of their prayers. Haoma the healer of the beautiful King of the diseased, prays for the goddess Ashi and the god Goush, and asks,

“So I shall bind the nefarious Turanian Afrasiab and drag him and force him, and take him shackled to Kaikhosrow, thus Kaikhosrow would slay him at the Chichast Lake, deep and full of water; so that I shall slay the boy who killed the renowned Siavash out of [vengeance and] treachery, so that the valorous Aghrirath gets his revenge.”

A great number of mythical heroes praise those gods and succeed. Among them are kings such as Houshang, Jamshid, Fereydoun, Kaikavous, and Khosrow, Tahmoureth, and Goshtasb who seek help in order to defeat demons, fairies and Druj Nasus (corpse demons). Houshang Pishdadi, after offering the sacrifice, makes his request from Nahid, Dravasp, Vay and Art:

So that I become the supreme king of all the countries, demons, and peoples, all the magic and fairies, the demons of Mazana, and the wicked dissidents. As I am the one who can destroy two-thirds of Mazanian demons and Varanian infidels. [14]

The request to become the greatest king and to rule all the demons, peoples, and overcome all the magic, fairies, and wicked dissidents is made again by Kaikavous.

These requests continue to be repeated by Fereydoun and Tahmoureth. They, like Houshang, ask Nahid the best kingdom and victory over the infidels. Fereydoun adds to these the wish from Art and Darvasp to fetter Afrasiab.

Jamshid's request from Aredvi Sura Nahid is the same as that of Houshang and Kaikavous. Nevertheless, what he asks of Art and Darvasp brings about unity of his kingdom: keeping Ahura Mazda's creation from hot or cold weather, thirst, hunger, old age, and death. He asks Vay glory and Sunliness.

Fereydoun, Athvia's son, prays to these four gods for defeating Azhidahak and having his wives.

“I shall rout the three-snouted, three-eyed, six-headed hydra... the mighty demon, and I shall seize both his wives, both shapely Sanghavak and Arenavak for reproduction and proper housekeeping” [14].

Among the kings, Goshtasp's request seems more authentic and more personal; he demands victory over Arjasp and other demon-worshiping scoundrels. In Art-Yasht and Nahid-Yasht, description has been made of a long list of Goshtasp's enemies with their precise description. For instance, in Art Yash (stanza 50), we read:

I, Ashta Aurvant, son of Visp Thur and Ashti, with a sharp helmet, a sharp armour, and full muscle with a hundred camels, will come out victorious in the battle in Zainiavar Khuizahe, will defeat the scoundrel Arjasp of Khiun and the infidel Darshinik. I shall overthrow the wicked Tathriavant, the wicked Sepinj Averashk, and return Hoday and Varithkna home; I shall destroy the lands of Khuins, in fifties, in hundreds, in hundreds of thousands, in thousands of ten thousands, in ten thousands of hundred thousand. [13]

Among all these kings, only Goshtasb has a semi-historical character; thus, we see that his request is more historical than mythological.

In addition to the aforementioned kings, sacrificial rituals and requests are also carried out by heroes such as Garshasp and Tous, and noblemen such as Zarir, Ashouzdangahe, Jamasp, and Visteour.

Garshasp requests domination over Golden-Heeled Ganderou and vengeance for his brother:

“So I shall prevail over Golden-Heeled Ganderou...”

Tous demands nourishment for the horses, and such power for himself that he can observe enemies from afar, and be able to rout his wicked rivals with a single blow and that he defeats Visesh's sons.

Other heroes use the same statement *yaṭ bauuāni* in posing their victory over their peers. This fight with demon worshipers does not end in the battle field. Abstinant Yosht of Faryan asks goddess Anahita to help him answer the questions of Akhtyah.

In all these cases the worshippers are blessed by gods and they succeed. But gods do not favour those demon worshippers and liars who hold the sacrificial rituals like others, and their prayers are not answered.

(Yt.5.29-30):

The three-snouted dragon slaughtered a hundred horses and a thousand cows and sheep of him, and said “give me what I want or I shall wipe out seven countries” [15].

Or Turanian Afrasiab who presents a sacrifice to Aredvi Sura Anahita in his underground army and in return asks her for dignity. (Yt.5.41-2) [15].

Vandermaishnish (*vaṇdarəmainiš*) and the brave sons of Vise Clan , *auruuu hunauuō vaēsakaiia* also did not achieve their goals though offering a hundred horses and a thousand cows and sheep.

Unlike the case with most worships, we see no signs of bloody sacrifice when it comes to Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster. The two do the ceremony as in the late Avesta; “mixed with a combination of Haoma and milk, Barsom, eloquent word, a right mind, with word and with body, and with sacred drinks and sacred word” [10].

Kellens believes that what Ahura Mazda and Zoroaster seek is related to Daena and this influences their manner of worshipping. “To persuade someone whose thought is Daena, whose words are Daena and his actions are for Daena [10]. Almost all of the worshippers crave for power; they want to change the course of history and make their names everlasting.

Undoubtedly, all sacrifices have an oblatory demand behind them. The main issue is that those which do not subsume murder seek Daena and that makes the rule: Zoroastrianism does not play a role here; what matters is whether the sacrifice is for the sake of Deana or not [10].

4.1.4. Sacrifice with no bleeding. In Middle Persian literature and historians texts a peculiar mode of sacrificing animals is addressed: a manner to conduct the sacrifice without bleeding. Strabo⁹ is the first one to mention this in his book *Geography*:

In Cappadocia, where Magi clans live and there are many Iranian yazatas' temples, people do not slay animals with knife but strike them with a pestle-like log in order to immobilize them [16].

Herodotus reports the same thing among Scythians:

They tie the hands of the sacrifice with a rope. The slayer stands behind the animal and tugs at the end of the rope and the victim falls to the ground. Then they call the god to whom the animal is offered; putting a string around its neck and tightening it with a stick, they suffocate the animal [17].

Indians follow a similar method. They believe that the victim must be presented to gods intact; hence they suffocate the animal in the ritual. However, the rationale behind this sacrifice is completely different in Iran. Reasons for this method and the logic behind its acceptance are illuminated in Denkart:

The reason for using a log instead of a knife to sacrifice the cow, apart from the purpose of purifying the body from demons and devils, is to have mercy upon that animal and to lessen the pain and suffering and also to avoid incorrect slaughter and when there is haste [8].

Zaehner ascribes the above words to Zoroaster and views it in accordance with the anti-violence attitude of Zoroaster:

Perhaps Zoroaster introduced humanistic principles into sacrificial rituals. He protests against the violence included in his opponents' conduct, not the very act of sacrifice. Late Zoroastrians used to stun the animal with a log and then kill it [8].

Evidence suggests that this was the official way of sacrificing at the time of some Sasanian kings. At the time of Yazdegerd II, Mihr Narseh wrote a letter to Armenian noblemen and invited them to Mazdaism. The full text of this letter is documented by some Armenian historians such as Elisaeus and Eznik. As the result of this letter, Elisaeus reports, sacrificing sheep without stunning them was outlawed.

In the excavations done in Dascylium, Turkey, a relief was found which belonged to Achaemenid Empire and displayed a magi sacrificing a cow and a ram. The clothing of this man seems quite Iranian and a stick is seen in his hand. These are in consistence with what Strabo reports. A significant point is that this region in the geographical map of Achaemenid emperor is located exactly in the state of Cappadocia.

Another example for sacrificing without bleeding is a ritual held for the god of water in which an animal, in particular a horse, is thrown into the water. This is very popular among Aryans and Benveniste considers it to be an old convention. Homer frequently mentions this sacrifice in his texts:

Trojan people used to sacrifice for Scamandre, the river of the plain of Troy, and threw horses alive into its tempestuous water. Pele, Achill's father, sacrificed fifty ewes for Spercheios, the flowing river in Thessaly. There used to be horse and bull sacrifices for Poseidon and the gods of the sea. Other Indo European tribes, such as Cimbres, Franks, Slaves, etc. also made sacrifices for rivers [2].

Herodotus reports on such ceremony at Xerxes' time, "when Xerxes' army got to Struma¹⁰ River in their campaign to Greece, the magi tried to satisfy the river by sacrificing white horses and casting magical spells" [18].

In Greek historical literature, Tacitus and Philostratus remark the spread of this convention among Parthia [19]. An example would be Mehrdad, a Parthian king who in one of his attacks to Minor Asia, ordered his white horses to be thrown into the sea to be offered to Apam Napat.

In section 12 of Bundahishn, there is a passage which describes the Farzadan Lake which bears a sign of this convention:

Farzadan Lake in Sistan is said to accept what a true man throws in it but casts off the villain's sacrifice.

4.2. Human Sacrifice in Iran. One of the most salient features of Old Iranian culture which distinguishes it from others at the same time is the absence of human sacrifice in it. According to historical documents human sacrifice has been an inseparable part of common people's belief. This convention was continued till first centuries AD in China, the 4th century BC in Mesopotamia and as we shall see further, till the 19th century in India.

Herodotus describes a strange account of human sacrifice among Scythians. They used to bury, he reports, the late king with his beloved, barman, cook, servant, companion, agent and some horses and some of his belongings. Moreover, in the King's first death anniversary, fifty of his best servants are suffocated, mummified, and seated on 50 mummified horses, they are interred around king's grave. In addition, Herodotus reports that Scythians used to sacrifice their captives [18].

4.2.1. Human sacrifice in Xerxes' period. Human sacrifice in a religion whose prophet forbids violence against animals, seems very far-fetched and if there is such a ritual in Iran, it must have survived of the old religion or of neighbouring cultures such as Mesopotamia. The only case in the

history of human sacrifice in Iran is related to events that Herodotus narrates about Xerxes' campaign to Greece and Minor Asia:

... They [Xerxes' army] arrived in a region in Adonia named Nine-Ways, they found the bridges destroyed in Astaribun River. Upon hearing the name of the place, they buried alive nine young boys and nine young girls from among the indigenous people. The custom of burying people alive is common among Persians and I have heard that Amestris, Xerxes' wife, having reached old age, ordered fourteen of the children of Persian noblemen to be buried alive in honour of the god they believed lived underground. [18]

What Herodotus narrates is impossible to happen in the context of Mazdaist thinking, because human victimization and polluting the soil with corpses are both regarded as great sins in Mazdaism. Additionally, the god living underground is but the Devil. In some translations of Herodotus history this god is called Hades¹¹. Strabo and Plutarch also regard Hades and the Devil as the same.

Herodotus considers this as a common ritual among Persians while Nyberg regards this as the creed of magi [20].

History has recorded that Darius, as a precondition for unity, wants Hamilkar, the king of Karthage¹², to stop sacrificing humans [21]. Hence, human sacrifice had been shameful among Persians at least before Xerxes. However, the inscription of Xerxes' time illustrates a significant shift in Iran's official religion at the time. Perhaps the reason for such an iconoclastic victimization can be traced back to this religious shift.

Various viewpoints have been proposed regarding Achaemenian religion, and that of Xerxes in particular. In inscriptions left by Xerxes, there are passages which make it difficult to point out his creed. The following is from the inscription XPh:

Then, as Ahura Mazda wished, I destroyed demons' temples and I declared demons are not to be worshipped. Where the demons were worshiped, I worshiped Ahura Mazda and venerated Asha [22].

There are signs of his acquaintance with Zoroastrian thought in this inscription:

- A) Using the word *diava*, in the sense used by Zoroaster, i.e., discarded Gods. According to Nyberg these are non-Iranian Gods, namely Baal and the foregoing inscription seems only a political justification for the pillage of other gods' temples. Though Frye believes by worshipers are meant not Egyptians and Babylonians but Iranians who did not worship Ahura Mazda [19]. This word was not used in the inscriptions of Darius and other kings after Xerxes.
- B) The clause "I worshipped Ahura Mazda venerating Asha" is stated twice and has striking similarities to Avestan style.
- C) Using the word *artāvan* to address abstinent people which is the Avestan equivalent for *artāvan*. This word is used only in this inscription.

Meanwhile, there can be found in Xerxes' writings words which differ from those used in Avestan literature. An example would be the word "Ahura Mazda" which, unlike its Avestan structure as an adjective and noun, is used as a single compound word *Auramazda*. The only exception is *Aurahya Mazdāha* in inscription XPc.10, used in the form of an adjective and noun; and the single word *Aura* in pamphlet DPe.24.

Another word is *brazmaniya*, found in Xerxes' inscription, which has no equivalent in Avesta and considering the Sanskritian word *brahman* it sounds as a remnant of Indo-European era.

Finally, although none of points mentioned seems to be sufficient to decide whether Xerxes is Zoroastrian or not, Nyberg refers to a Zoroastrian yearbook whose relics are found in parts of Iran's ancient territory and considers this as a hint of the officialdom of Zoroastrianism at a time close to Xerxes':

The oldest proof of the introduction of Zoroastrianism to the west dates back to a calendar in 485 BC which is declared for official use. There are many versions of it, one in Avestan, one in ancient Persian that was common in Cappadocia and names of its months are by accident found in a Greek text; As Al-Biruni reports there are also a Khwarizmi and Sogdian version. [20].

Zaehner considers Xerxes and/or Artaxerxes time as the start of Zoroastrianism in Iran. However, this does not entail either that Xerxes was a Zoroastrian or that what others ascribe to him is related to this religion.

4.2.3. The purpose of sacrifice in Iran. In studying sacrificial rituals in Iran, we encounter an interesting point that has attracted the attention of Western historians as well and that is Iranians' perspective on the victim. The following statement from Porseshniha manifests their view:

Thou favourable cow, Thou merciful cow, we send thy soul to the nearest light that has been created, that of a man's eyes. [23]

This is in consistent with Humbach's translation of this part in which Ohrmazd's satisfaction and forgiveness of sins necessitates offering the soul of a cow by the family. It follows that the Zoroastrian worshipping ritual is done with the purpose of offering the victim's soul to the gods and for its meat. Regarding sacrificial rituals in Iran, Strabo points out:

After singing hymns of prayers, while wreathing the victim, they perform the sacrifice in a clean place. The magus, the headman of the ritual, lacerates the victim. The participants obtain their share and leave the ceremony and nothing is given to the gods. They are convinced that the soul of the victim is the only thing gods need, yet some say they place a small part of the victim's entrails in the fire. Iranians make a distinction between water and fire with regard to the scarifying manner. In the case of fire, they put thornless wood in the fire and pour fat upon it and while spraying oil they ignite it from the bottom. They never blow the fire, but use their fans. Those who quench the fire or contaminate it with corpses or unclean things will be murdered [16]

According to Porseshinha, sacrifice incorporates sending the victim's soul towards light, first to the nearest one which is the eyes of the man of whom only a name is mentioned here and then "supposedly to the fire of the ritual, to the moon, to the sun, to the stars and infinite lights in which gods reside" [23]. However, the very eyes of the man seem sufficient to accept soul of the victim. In Yasna 45, section 8 we read: "Desirous to see him, with prayers of respect, I have just see Ahura Mazda in my eyes..." [7].

Therefore, the victim's destination is immortal light or gods' places. Kellens believes the soul of the victim crystallizes all the ritual's secrets of the hereafter. In this manner, the soul of the animal goes to the world above through this ceremony. Nevertheless, it is the human soul that mysteriously replaces the animal soul and displays the so-called journey to the other world which has to happen someday. The aim is what believers conducting these rituals have purposefully chosen and crave. In fact the victimizer's Daena accompanies the victim in the journey of its soul [23]. Perhaps passage 14 of Yasna 33 alludes to this very idea:

"To Mazda, Zoroaster offered his body's strength..." [7].

Gignoux and Kellens relate the journey of an immaterial part of human to another world to be a remnant from the Shamanistic aspects of worshipping rituals in ancient Avesta [23].

Still the question of "why all these rituals?" remains. In Yasna 33, section 12, it is mentioned that Ahura Mazda receives energy from Asha and in Yasna 45, section 10, the gifts from worshippers gives him energy and immortality:

Ahura Mazda would emerge the breath that (Armaiti) with Asha and Vohuman give him [23].

Zaehner believes that the purpose of the sacrificial ritual is to reach physical and spiritual immortality since sacrificing the cow prevents death and Haoma provides spiritual immortality [8]. The same thing exists in the myth of resurrection, when Soshiyans emerges:

The worship of decorating the dead will be done by Soshiyans and his companions and the Hadayush cow will be slain in that worship and they will make from his fat and white Haoma a drink of immortality (anush); they give that drink to people and they will all be immortal till eternity.

Additionally, in line with the rationale for sacrifice stated above there is another belief which has been referred to mostly in Pahlavi texts while in Avesta the only reference to in this regard is in Yasna 11. In this viewpoint the sacrificed flesh is presented to yazatas. In Bundahishn this fashion of sacrifice has been attributed to Mashī and Mashyana, the first human couple:

Then after another thirty days and nights they stumbled upon a dark white sheep. They cut him into pieces and at the guidance of the sacred ones they set it on fire with lotus and box tree, as those trees are most apt for fire. They also put fire on their mouth and at first they burn the firewood of Kuhnaj tree¹³, olive and also frankincense tree and palm branch and roasted that sheep and laid three handfuls flesh in the fire and said, "To the fire!" And tossed one piece to the sky and said, "To the yazatas!" A vulture rose to capture the flesh but couldn't; [hence a dog came and took the meat away], as dogs are the first to eat the meat. [4]

With all the ambiguities surrounding this sacrifice, the sacrifice flesh is offered to yazatas, the fire and the sky. This sacrifice differs from what Strabo says about Iranian rituals. Neither offering flesh, nor blowing onto fire is allowed in Mazdaism. However, it has been cited later that Mashyana offers sacrifice for demons as well, as we will discuss further in the section on evil sacrifice. On the whole, it seems as though the first couple performed sacrificial rituals by a different tradition than that of Mazdaism.

Religious texts have further pointed out to this issues. *Ravayat-e-Pahlavi* and *Shayest Nashayest* provide a very detailed list on each yazata's share of the victim's organs:

The question of which part of each of sheep, cow or other beast belongs to which specific god and how they should be burned separately is as follows: Wild animals are regarded as pets; cow, giraffe, zebra, ewe, mountain ewe, pig, deer and every other bloody animal whose breed is not known, when slain, its flesh must be divided in this manner: the jaw, the tongue, the left eye belong to the god Homa; the neck is for the god Ordibehesht; the head for the god Vay, the right arm goes to Ardavisour and the left arm to the Fravahar of Goshtasp; the back for Barzad; the side for the virtuous Fravahar of the Females; the belly for Sepandarmath; the penis is for Vanand Star; the kidney goes to the Haft Urang; the chest belongs to Fravahar of Priests (Mobedan) and pleura to that of fighters; the liver is for Shahrivar; spleen goes to Mansarsepand; the bowel is for the Fravashi's of virtuous Males, the coccyx belongs to Espitaman's Fravahar and the fat is for the virtuous god Bad. Whatever remains goes to the other Ameshaspandan. There was someone who told this about Gushuda. [24]

This division has been exactly repeated in stanza 4 of chapter 11 in the book *Shayest Nashayest*. However, it appears that this list predates either *Ravayat Pahlavi* or *Shayest Nashayest* since the portion of the god Homa stated in these books are the same as what has been stated in Yasna Eleven.

"Ahura Mazda, the father of Ashun, has brought me, Homa, two jaws and one tongue and one left eye as a gift." [15]

Ultimately, it seems that the thought of offering the soul of the sacrifice not its flesh or blood is more consistent with Zarathustra's ideology and Mazdaist beliefs.

Conclusions

The Ahura Mazda as mentioned by Zoroaster in Gahan has a unique description among all gods of the ancient world. He is a distinctive, powerful, creator who loves His creatures. More recent Avestas describe Him more or less in the same way as mentioned. To Iranians, yazatas represent the ultimate hope and the source of all the goodness that people desire. It is implicit in the descriptions of the beauty of yazatas the affection between them and their worshippers.

Yazatas' position is quite unattainable. Their conduct and deeds are divine, their beauty is mythological, they are praised by all, and allies of truth-lovers. Power is ultimately created by Ahura Mazda.

In Yashts, we are introduced with mythological characters who, by sacrificing manifold animals such as horses, cows, sheep, express their requests from yazatas. Such rituals are, in all probability, remnants of pre-Zoroastrian religious rituals wherein many animals were victimized.

An examination of sacrificial rituals in Iran and a perusal of Avesta and Middle Persian (Pahlavi) texts leads us to believe that Zoroaster was against bloody sacrifice, especially of beneficial animals. In Yasnas 32 and 48, he remonstrates against this idea, and attempts to substitute the flesh and blood of beneficial animals with milk and fat in sacrificial rituals.

Iranians thought the spirit of the victim fitting for yazatas and yazatas had no need for gifts of meat. Perhaps human sacrifice is another point of disagreement between victimization in Iran and other civilizations. These disagreements may be explained by considering teachings of Zoroaster who, after the richness of Iranian soul, left an indelible mark on Iranian and world civilization and in view of the fact that Iranians were always inclined to monotheism.

Notes:

1. By Western historians is meant Herodotus, Strabo, Kotzias, and Plutarch.
2. Stanza 50 of Bahram Yasht and stanza 58 of Tishtar Yasht
3. Etymology
4. It is discussed under the section 'notion of sacrifice'.
5. It should be noted that the oldest *Upanishads* were written between 500 to 800 BC.
6. For more information see Kellens, 1999-2000, p. 742.
7. Diodorus Siculus was a Greek historian who lived in the first century BC. His writings are based on the works of historians who lived before him such as Herodotus, Kotzias, and Hecataeus.
8. Ahmad ibn Davoud ibn Vanand Abu Hanifa Dinwari. Among the historians of the third century Hijri. His book, *al-Akhbar al-Tiwal* describes the events from Adam to Yazdegerd III.
9. Strabo, a Greek historian and geographist who lived in Minor Asia between 19 and 63 AD.
10. River Struma starts from Belgian mountains and flows into Greece and Aegean Sea. The Ancient city of Amphipolis lay in the mouth of this river.
11. In Greek mythology, Hades (Greek ᾍδης) was the name of the ruler of the dead and the underground world.
12. Carthage was the name of the ancient Phoenician city in the north of Africa at the bank of Mediterranean Sea.
13. Kuhanj means the hawthorn tree.

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